

The In-Betweeners

When it comes to achievement at school, 'the middle' is in danger of being not so much squeezed, as ignored, warns **Geoff Jones**...

In an ideal world, of course, children would all be treated equally in school – given the same support, the same chances to succeed and the same additional help or instruction. Yet in reality this can be a challenge to achieve universally for a number of reasons both practical (time, limited staff or resources) and institutional (Government guidelines, the drive on performance or league tables).

If we were to analyse it, a seemingly disproportionate amount of school time and resources could be considered as being spent on the top and bottom ten per cent of performers, with the remaining 80 per cent that might be classed as 'average' having comparatively less support. As such, the question needs to be asked: are these 'middle-ground' performers fulfilling their true potential?

Currently, schools are asked by the Government to identify and support the needs of certain groups of children on top of normal provision; the Department for Education (DfE) has recently given new teaching standards with, for the first time, a clear expectation of the need to support and challenge high ability students. Meanwhile, according to the DfE, those children classed as 'disadvantaged' are likely to under perform on average compared to their peers, and as such, a number of initiatives, including the increased Pupil Premium additional funding, have been put in place for schools to help drive achievement in these students.

This is reflected in school performance tables, with information now included on the progress made by groups of pupils with different levels of attainment. The Government claims that this will enable parents and others to see how well children of different abilities are catered for – but does this run the risk of creating a potentially divisive nature in schools and classrooms? Will some students potentially drift through their school experience, without the same 'push'?

If schools are to drive attainment across the board, it can be argued that increased focus should be paid to boosting the achievement of the majority 'mid-performers', which would significantly better the overall school



ABOUT THE EXPERT

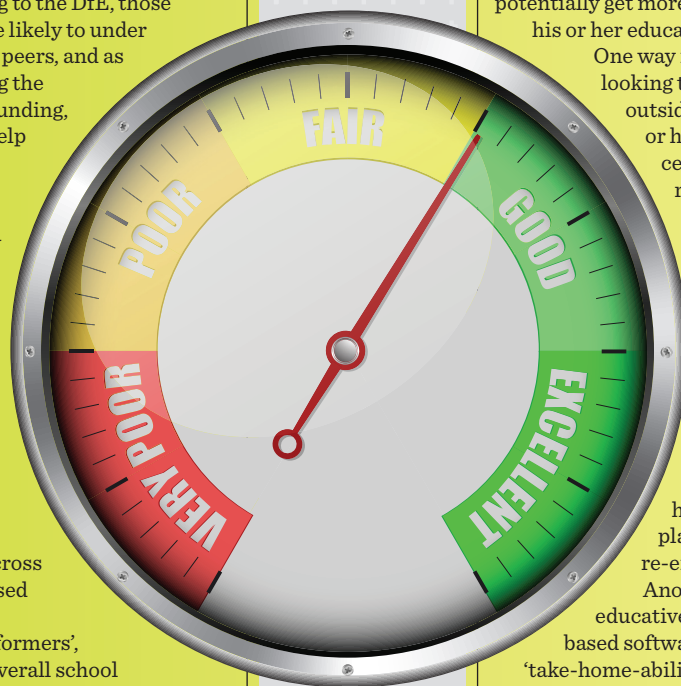
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performance. But how can this be achieved with limited budgets, and in the strict time frame of lessons and the school day?

In order to maximise potential learning outcomes for all students, it is important that formal education is not an isolated process, but works alongside wider aspects such as at-home learning and increased parental involvement in the process – and there are various ways that this can be facilitated.

For example, more and more schools are now adopting 'Bring Your Own Device' (BYOD) policies; instead of the school providing technology for students to use, students bring their own WiFi enabled devices that they already own and use out of school. One of the key benefits of BYOD learning is the fact that it provides students with the flexibility of anytime, anywhere learning, which also has a positive effect on mobile learning adoption. It gives young people the option to carry on with their work seamlessly from home because everything they need to access is there on the one device. Through this process, parents can also potentially get more of an insight into their child's work and his or her education as a whole.

One way in which growing numbers of parents are looking to maximise learning opportunities outside of school is through the use of private or home tutors, whether individuals, study centres or tuition businesses. Recent research reported in The Guardian in April revealed that there has been a boom in private tutoring, and while this can be a useful way to supplement and support the work done in schools, it can prove a costly resource, limiting its accessibility. An often more affordable option is the use of online tutoring, which gives convenience and flexibility. All tutoring provides feedback that can be used by the parents, and the school if necessary, to help drive the learning process. It can play a valuable role in enabling pupils to re-engage with mainstream learning. Another popular option is the use of educative software. In many cases, curriculum based software that schools are already using offers 'take-home-ability', meaning it can be made accessible at



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home for students to extend or reinforce learning as a valuable resource outside the classroom. Other examples are designed especially to cater for at home provision, or for homework. This is often a straightforward way of addressing learning at home, with costs built into the schools' investment, and students familiar with the technology and how to use the software already from experience and instruction in school.

These are all useful ideas – and there are more – but an important consideration is how we ensure that they are successful. This is reliant on a close connection between home and school environments to offer a sense of consistency and support to students. Improving the quality and frequency of communication with students' families can be central to this. When you consider that children spend 15 per cent of their lives from the ages of five to 16 in school and the remaining 85 per cent with their families, parents and communities, the influence of the latter is unavoidable (*Literacy changes lives, 2006*). Stronger engagement with – and encouraging the help – of parents and guardians is something many schools are exploring to help support the learning process.

The Epstein model identifies 'three spheres of influence' that directly affect student learning and development: family, school and the community. When the people within each of these communicate and interact, they begin to overlap, and students are better supported with fewer 'gaps' to fall through. Feinstein and Symons (1999) stated that parental interest in their child's education was the "single greatest predictor of achievement" at age 16.

Through inviting parents to learn about the process of formal education and to ask questions about their child's curriculum, progress and assessment, we can help them to develop a deeper understanding. Some schools have already taken the step to improving the home-school relationship by providing training sessions for parents. These can be on skills such as IT, providing a more detailed knowledge on the curriculum, or explaining how parents can improve communication with their children, helping support both parties. Importantly, a great number of parents want to be involved. In fact, according to recent research the majority of parents – more than 70 per cent – express a desire for a more regular flow of information, as well as feedback on the good work and achievements of their children that deserve recognition. More than half of parents want to hear more about 'everyday activity' that takes place in schools; the homework set, upcoming test or exam dates, and their child's behaviour in particular lessons. This can be valuable in helping to reinforce school messaging for both the parents and students.

In this digital age, real-time dialogue and aligning with modern communication technologies that people are familiar with is essential for establishing a positive, constructive relationship. For schools, IT enables information to be captured, monitored and distributed much more efficiently. Parents can then receive and access information about their children's work, progress, attendance and behaviour when and where they want, using, for example, secure online or mobile 'app' access. More than this, communication systems that can be used by teachers can send images of students' work, or a clip of a drama performance recorded live in the lesson immediately to the parents, closing the literal and metaphorical gap between school and home.

Bringing together the distinct realms of school and home to support the learning process through effective, regular communication can contribute significantly to all students' achievement across all abilities. With the time and resource pressure on teachers, encouraging students to continue their learning with the support of a network outside of the school can make all the difference to the end result – at that applies to the middle majority, as well as the extremes on either end of the spectrum.

